Theodore A. Harris: Collage and Conflict

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Theodore A. Harris defines himself as a “confrontational collagist, engaged in visual warfare, decolonizing the mind through collage.” He uses images of the US Capitol dome, credit cards, and slave irons to raise questions about systems of social and political oppression, including imperialism, capitalism, and racism. Art historian Dennis Raverty has described Harris’s work as “highly-charged, brutally-confrontational and unsparingly critical, with a rhetorical quality that is almost Baroque in intensity.” While conveying complex political messages, his collages are also aesthetically beautiful, with surfaces marked by the gestural violence of his creative process. In his melding of content and aesthetics, Harris engages viewers with critical questions about systems of institutional power—questions that resonate on intellectual, associative and visual levels. I have had several conversations with Harris, during which he spoke at length about his work and his artistic goals.

Harris has been making collage and process-based work since around 1986. He has worked with the Philadelphia Anti-Graffiti Network and the development of the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. He has also taught visual art and poetry at the Hammonds House Museum in Atlanta and elsewhere. Since 1998 he has exhibited his works at museums and educational institutions across the US and internationally. From 2006 to 2010 he worked on mixed media series of triptychs entitled Collage and Conflict. He has since then produced a series called Facts on the Ground, and a recent digital project called Conscientious Objector to Formalism. He is mostly self-educated and a voracious reader, whose studio is filled with hundreds of books. This essay will focus on triptychs from the Collage and Conflict series, featured in an exhibition at La Salle University Art Museum.

Harris weaves together images and words from various sources, including popular advertisements, military journals, and literary works, creating intertextual artworks that call upon viewers’ knowledge and recognition of images, symbols and words. He also inverts some of the images, turning visual symbols and their meanings upside down, and manipulates their orientation in relation to other images and also the viewer. This strategy amplifies the visual interaction of signs and symbols on the surface of the artwork, requiring viewers to make thoughtful connections between disparate images, reversed symbols, and poetic texts, in relation to their own knowledge about politics and contemporary events. While some of Harris’s juxtapositions and inversions are easily readable, others require careful consideration to fully understand the visual operations of his collages. Thus, viewers interpret these artworks in relation to a complex network of texts, both

within artworks themselves and in reference to other cultural texts, including real life experiences and personal political sentiments.

This intertextuality is also a significant aspect of Harris’s professional artistic practices and his communication strategies. He has published his collages on the covers of scholarly and political publications such as *African American Review*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (2011); and black poetry anthologies such as *Dance the Guns to Silence* (2005). In 2002 Harris exhibited his original collages paired with poetry written by the late New Jersey Poet Laureate Amiri Baraka in response to his artwork. Harris’s collages and Baraka’s poems were also featured together in a collaborative book entitled *Our Flesh of Flames* (2008). Additionally, Harris has written and published his own poetry in various literary journals and books. Working in his preferred medium of collage, which inherently lends itself to intertextual communication, Harris maximizes collage’s potential for creating complex multi-faceted artworks.

Many of Harris’s triptychs address the subject of warfare and the global struggle against capitalist and imperialist interests. In *War Chest*, Harris seeks to expose the falsehoods of US patriotic symbols. The surface is jammed with cut-out and torn images juxtaposed and layered across all three panels. On the left are images of US soldiers, the Pentagon, an envelope addressed to Colin Powell, and a dove inscribed with the word “WAR!” The dove appears again in the central panel, along with more soldiers and the question, “HAS DEMOCRACY ABUSED OUR TRUST?” On the right is a book cover for *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* by LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka), above which an extended arm tattooed with the word “ART” holds a loaded gun. Here Harris reinforces the idea of “art as a weapon,” a phrase he often uses in his manifestos and lectures. As art critic and theorist Gene Ray noted, Harris’s artworks belong to a history of “weaponized” collage, including artists such as John Heartfield, Martha Rosler and Peter Kennard. He described Harris’s collaged artworks as “symbolic weapons—visual resistance to the structures of oppression.” Comparisons might also be made with African American collagists such as Romare Bearden, whose work addressed issues of racism and civil rights.

In *War Chest*, the surface of the triptych is itself a battlefield. Layered on top of the collaged images are raised circular shapes suggestive of bullet wounds. These protrusions unify the surface of the three panels, while serving as a metaphor for warfare. Harris’s use of the triptych format is evocative of Christian altarpieces, though as Raverty noted, “whereas a traditional altarpiece is meant to inspire faith, Harris’s triptychs are meant to encourage doubt and to make the viewer question the presented narrative.” The *Collage and Conflict* series gave Harris the opportunity to work with a tripartite composition and to experiment with gestural accumulations on the surface that he refers to as “gashes” and “wounds.” He noted, “It was a compositional challenge to tell a story in three panels, and treat them almost like a cinematic film sequence.” He added, “With the Iraq war happening, I wanted to add some theatrical drama to the work. So, it has collage as the foundation, but I wanted to do something more with the surface.” He explained that the “gashes” and “wounds” were inspired by an exhibition of documentary videos of Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, presented by the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia in 2005. With his collages, Harris felt it was important for the viewer to recognize the materiality of the “wounds,” and to question the source of the violence and its implications in the real world. In *War Chest*, the “wounds” are built up with acrylic red paint, haloed by dripping spray-painted gold.
Harris's collaged surfaces exhibit a powerful viscerality that enhances his anti-imperialist messages and counters the original mediated role of the images. Amiri Baraka has remarked on Harris's “truthoscopic sensibility,” noting that “At times, the images he thrusts at us are sharp enough to make us wince, with understanding and recognition.” Harris has made numerous works, such as *Aesthetic Distance* and *Don’t Shoot the Caregivers*, which address the distancing effect of the news media and its manipulation of the American public. Harris noted, “You are seeing the war through the eyes of the photographer, because he wants to make things look nicer for the television audience. They don’t show you the worst stuff.” Harris argued that the news media desensitizes our understanding of the human costs of war. Thus, he creates “gashes” and “wounds” on the surface of his artworks to raise awareness of the human toll associated with imperialist and capitalist interests. Harris views his artistic practice as critical, curative and restorative. In his manifesto for the *Collage and Conflict* series, he described his view of “war as a map of wounds,” stating that “The collagist is a surgeon with scissors and the glue sticks are gauze and donated blood.” In representing the wounds of imperialism, capitalism and colonialism, his work has noted affiliations with that of Wangechi Mutu, who also refers to her collages as surgeries. In Harris’s work, there is a tension between the aesthetically beautiful and balanced compositions, the visceral materiality of the surfaces, and the layered political and social content of the works.

Harris continues his gestural treatment of global anti-imperialist themes in other triptychs, such as *End This War, after Shirley Chisholm*. This work features a central panel with a haloed symbol of a skull and crossbones above the number 322. Harris explained that these elements refer to a secret society to which George W. Bush and his father belonged at Yale University. The skull and crossbones symbol is superimposed “like a target” on a plate of White House china, with the US presidential seal visible behind the skull. On the left is a scene of police brutality with a black woman in a chokehold, juxtaposed with foreground images of soldiers. On the right is an inverted US Capitol dome, suspended above an upside-down Statue of Freedom—a bronze statue representing a Native American that is located on top of the US Capitol building. Harris explained that here the statue is detached from the Capitol “as if it is deploying democracy,” referring to US imperialism in spreading democracy around the world. The presence of a military helicopter superimposed on the Capitol contributes to multiple readings, and to the suggestion that a bomb is about to drop. Harris dedicated the triptych to Shirley Chisholm (1924-2005), the first African American woman elected to Congress who in 1972 made an unsuccessful bid for the Democratic presidential nomination. Chisholm courageously opposed the draft and US
involvement in the Vietnam War. Harris named the artwork “End This War” after a speech that Chisholm made during the Vietnam War, which was recorded in the documentary film directed by Shola Lynch entitled *Chisholm ’72: Unbought and Unbossed* (2005).

With this triptych, Harris highlights connections between US involvement in international conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Vietnam War, and in more recent wars in the Middle East and Africa. He links Chisholm’s political speech with more recent public protests against US foreign military operations. Additionally, his inclusion of a black woman in a chokehold is a reference to the ongoing domestic problem of police brutality in America. Several of his earlier artworks memorialize individuals who died as a result of police brutality, including *Remember Eric Smith* (1999), *Diallo’s Blues Are Our Blues* (1999), *In Defense of Thomas Jones* (2002). Harris continues to protest and raise awareness of this important issue in his artworks, in response to the persistence of racial profiling, police abuses, and unwarranted deaths in America. Thus, his artworks offer a critique of US foreign policy as well as domestic issues which have a negative impact on human lives.

Harris utilizes a visual language that incorporates image juxtapositions as well as inversions, many of which become repeated as key motifs in his artwork. Art critic David Craven has commented on how Harris “uses, abuses and inverts stock national symbols, such as the US Capitol building.” Harris first incorporated the inverted image of the Capitol dome in a work entitled *Vetoed Dreams* (1995). As a symbol of US political power and democracy, the inversion of the Capitol has a negating effect and flips the symbolic meanings upside down, generating a multitude of readings and questions for viewers. Gene Ray has argued that Harris does not reject democracy, “But he is pointing to the fact that the promise of equality and freedom for all remains unrealized. So long as systematic injustices remain the reality, so long as the disproportionate police violence and incarceration inflicted on blacks, immigrants and the poor continue to be the norm, then the noble values of democracy remain so much empty rhetoric.” Harris also incorporates other symbols of US democracy such as the Lincoln Memorial, and symbols of capitalism such as American Express travelers checks and credit cards with military images. His representation of the inverted Capitol dome and other symbols, alongside photographs of real people and events, encourages viewers to spend time analyzing the meanings and relationships between the images.

Harris uses some of these key visual elements on a tightly-focused triptych entitled *War is the Sound of Money Eating, after John G. Hall*. Seeking to complement the powerful economy of
Hall's poetry, Harris constructs a formal three-part composition with central plate flanked by two fans. However, Harris layers the images to create complex messages about capitalism, democracy, religious belief, and patriotism. The central panel features an upside-down commemorative dinner plate, displaying the Statue of Liberty in front of an American flag, overlaid with the words, “War is the Sound of Money Eating,” from one of John G. Hall’s poems published in Left Curve. The two side panels display church fans with images of Leonardo Da Vinci’s Last Supper, combined with soldiers on the left, and an American Express business charge card and a Chevron oil tanker on the right. On the left is a Dada text by John Heartfield and George Grosz arguing that it is preferable for bullets to damage paintings by the Old Masters than to rip through the homes of poor people. On the right panel, Harris darkens the surface with painterly gestures that look like oil splatters, reinforcing the presence of the tanker and the visual associations between capitalism and violence. Additionally, he uses matches to burn the surface of the panels to create “wounds,” and to give the idea of gunfire.

For this artwork, Harris appropriates images of objects which come from the sanctified spheres of patriotism and religion. He transforms these images into critical “covers” of the original objects through political satire and inversions. Harris related, “I wanted to put images of soldiers looking like they are storming into the Last Supper, to put these contradictory things together and see what would happen in the theater of art.” Harris's experimental de-sanctification of objects contributes to the theatricality of the artwork, suggesting an emotive presence, as well as a performative dimension. His use of both the commemorative plate and the church fans is referential to the original functions and meanings, but he has altered these images and infused them with new critical meanings. His incorporation of religious imagery is relevant to the ongoing issue of the relationship between church and state, in America and elsewhere in the world.

Harris takes images of both symbolic and everyday objects and layers them to generate new meanings, leading to a performativity in the expression and interpretation of his works. In Postcard from Conquest, he appropriates a postcard depicting a historical painting, Landing of Columbus, which is located in the US Capitol Rotunda. He superimposes images of the front and back of the postcard with photographs of soldiers, an American Express business charge card, and a prison corridor from Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. Harris's inclusion of the charge card implies the corporate profit involved with conquest and occupation, and is critical of the collusion of capitalist and imperialist forces. In Harris's hands, these symbols become theatrical devices which he manipulates in relation to each other and to the viewer. Gene Ray has observed how “Harris's collages unmask the violence of power. He sets up this collision of images, symbols, and colors, and urges us to think it through and find our way to the meanings.” In a sense, Harris stages artistic battles involving content and aesthetics, bombarding the viewer with images, texts and symbols, which are then overlaid with dramatic marked and painted surfaces. These elements serve as weapons in his anti-imperialist and anti-racist critique.

Harris also uses artistic strategies of “veiling” and “revealing” to create tensions between foreground and background, and between different kinds of meanings and associations. He is very conscious of this dialectic, and he points out how, in Postcard from Conquest, the image of a deeply-receding prison corridor adds spatial perspective and “puts a hole in the panel,” while the dripping lines of paint on the artwork’s surface “push the image back.” Images of newspaper Stock Exchange reports are also washed in blood-like splatters and drips of paint. The materiality and flatness of the drips, and the lines of paint connecting the open “wounds” on all three panels, create a web-like design which unifies the surface and adds continuity to the triptych. Harris described these lines as “threads of blood connecting the wounds. They could even be umbilical cords,
or poetic strings of text.” While contributing to the cohesiveness of the artwork, these surface accumulations also highlight the idea of the physical human damage caused by institutional forces of imperialism and capitalism. Harris’s veiling is provocative in raising questions about conquest and occupation which still persist today.

Harris continues his dialogue with politics, aesthetics and literature in a triptych entitled The Price of the Ticket, after James Baldwin. On the left panel, Harris includes a cut-out photograph of Mitt Romney giving a speech while running for president, in front of a religious pamphlet asking “HELL. Suppose It’s True After All?” The image of Romney is backed by flames, with the seal of the George Bush Presidential Library Foundation rising like a halo above him. The central panel features a collaged photo of soldiers pointing guns inside the White House—a scene which Harris admits was inspired by Martha Rosler’s Bringing the War Home series. He also includes an African man looking into the scene, with his back turned to the cover of Baldwin’s book, giving the panel what Harris describes as an “inside/outside mix.” The right panel features a Capitol One Platinum MasterCard with a military tank, surmounted with the text, “Museum of Modern Art.” Harris’s inclusion of a painting by Robert Motherwell, Elegy to the Spanish Republic, in the upper right panel places his work in dialogue with this Abstract Expressionist artist whom he greatly admires. As in other works from the Collage and Conflict series, Harris has marked the surface with gestural splatters, lines, and “wounds” across a mostly-white background, continuing the white color of Baldwin’s book cover. In doing so, he presents a balance of images, ideas, shapes and colors across the three panels.

Harris has used the phrase “price of the ticket,” which refers to James Baldwin’s famous collection of essays about African American experience, in multiple artworks. For Baldwin, the price of the ticket was the self-awareness, sacrifices and struggles that came with understanding how his skin color operated as a “disagreeable mirror,” reflecting “white man’s guilt” in recognizing the history of slavery in America. Harris commented that “when you hold up a mirror to society, it may be disagreeable, but it has to be faced.” Harris noted that for black artists, fighting institutional racism and de-mystifying racial stereotypes is part of the ticket price. He added that “we become artists out of love and the desire to be creative…. So for me the price of the ticket is my drive to construct a dialogue with viewers, to raise questions, and to make art that is blatantly political and critical of institutionalized systems of oppression.”
In his Collage and Conflict series, Harris holds up a disagreeable mirror which is fractured from the effects of warfare and awash with blood from the cross-fire of bullet wounds. His artworks have a jolting effect, waking up viewers and prompting them to think about intertextual visual connections and their meanings. Harris noted that “It is hard to talk about our country like this. But it is important to look in the mirror and be truthful. I think that is the best kind of patriotism.” His works are provocative and aim to inspire thoughts and conversations, as we partake in our democratic freedom to constructively criticize not just our government but also our society, and to spark seeds of political and social change.

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